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PUBLICATIONS

*The
Whistler
Peacock
Room*

THE FREER GALLERY OF ART

SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION

SUSAN HOBBS
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Frontispiece: Detail of south wall, *Harmony in Blue and Gold: The Peacock Room* (04.61), 1876-77; oil and gold leaf on leather and wood; 471 x 180 cm.

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FOREWORD

This illustrated booklet consists of two sections, each devoted to the discussion of an object in the collection of the Freer Gallery of Art. The first of these bears the full title *Harmony in Blue and Gold: The Peacock Room* (04.61). The second is the painting entitled *Rose and Silver: The Princess from the Land of Porcelain* (03.91). The latter work is displayed permanently in the Peacock Room, whose decorations were designed to complement it.

Information concerning the restoration of the Peacock Room has been taken from an earlier edition by Burns A. Stubbs, with further details provided by John Winter of the Freer Gallery Technical Laboratory. The booklet, edited by Julia K. Murray with the assistance of Sarah L. Newmeyer, was produced by the Smithsonian Institution Press and was designed by Elizabeth Sur.

1. *Portrait of Frederick R. Leyland: Arrangement in Black* (05.100), 1873; oil on canvas; 192.8 x 91.9 cm. Frederick Leyland, Whistler's most important patron during the 1870s, commissioned the artist to paint the Peacock Room.

Harmony in Blue and Gold: The Peacock Room

PAINTED FROM 1876 TO 1877 BY

JAMES MCNEILL WHISTLER (1834–1903)

The Peacock Room, a bold and innovative interior for its time, captured the imagination of Londoners when James McNeill Whistler decorated it from the autumn of 1876 to the spring of 1877. Its decorative scheme departed radically from the heavier construction characteristic of Victorian interiors. The delicate wood shelving and sideboard expressed a general trend in English building toward light horizontal and vertical elements derived from Far Eastern architecture. Moreover, Whistler's peacock motifs ushered in an organic curvilinearity that was to typify much turn-of-the-century design. Although Whistler stubbornly insisted "There is—there can be—no Art Nouveau—there is only Art!"¹ his Peacock Room has long been considered an important precursor to the aesthetic movement known as Art Nouveau.² While relying heavily on well-known iconographical sources, Whistler synthesized them into a distinctive artistic statement that came to symbolize an era.

The ornate turquoise-and-gold interior was originally the dining room in the London mansion of Frederick Richard Leyland, Whistler's most important patron during the 1870s. Proud and reserved with the meticulous habits of the self-made businessman, Leyland began work as an office boy in the shipping firm of John Bibby and Sons of Liverpool. By the age of thirty, Leyland had gained control of the company, renaming it the Leyland Line. Away from his high-pressured life as a merchant and financier, Leyland was devoted to music, literature, and art. He educated himself in these fields, and by the time that Whistler met him, Leyland had already built up a remarkable collection of Italian paintings and works by the contemporary British Pre-Raphaelites.³ Appropriately, Whistler called him "the Liverpool Medici."⁴ Leyland's enthusiasm for the Pre-Raphaelites stemmed from his friendship with the painter Dante Gabriel Rossetti, who introduced Leyland to Whistler in 1865.⁵

In 1869 Whistler traveled to Speke Hall, Leyland's country home near Liverpool, to paint the shipping magnate's portrait. He also began portraits of Leyland's wife, Frances, and their four children. Today, the full-length painting of Leyland in evening dress belongs to the Freer Gallery of Art (05.100, completed in 1873; see fig. 1) and Frances Leyland's portrait is in the Frick

Collection, New York. Although the children's portraits were never finished, there are many preliminary studies for them in the Freer collection.

Leyland decided that he needed a luxurious London townhouse reflecting his status as a successful entrepreneur. In 1869 he purchased a residence at 23 Queen's Gate and a few years later acquired a property at 49 Prince's Gate known as "The Mansion." In this imposing house Leyland hoped "to realize his dream of living the life of an old Venetian merchant in modern London,"⁶ and it was there that the Peacock Room was completed.

While the Mansion's rather severe exterior seemed acceptable to Leyland, he asked the architect Norman Shaw, Shaw's assistant Thomas Jeckyll, and Murray Marks, a dealer in blue-and-white porcelain, to create for him an opulent interior reminiscent of an Italian palace. They furnished the residence with oriental rugs, installed an ornate Jacobean ceiling with pendant lights throughout the house, and hung paintings from floor to ceiling according to current Victorian taste. Whistler was asked to paint seventeen quadrilateral panels for the walls of an elaborate staircase brought to the Mansion from a stately home in Northumbria. He rendered these in imitation aventurine lacquer and decorated them with an oriental flower motif in rose and white. All these panels now belong to the Freer Gallery (04.458-04.474).

Whistler's painting *Rose and Silver: The Princess from the Land of Porcelain* (03.91, painted 1863-64; see fig. 14), which had formerly hung in the Velázquez Room of Leyland's house at Queen's Gate, was to hang over the mantel in the dining room at 49 Prince's Gate. Whistler's concern with providing the proper setting for the painting led ultimately to the creation of the Peacock Room as it is today. In the early stages of the Mansion's renovation, the remodeling of the dining room was the responsibility of Thomas Jeckyll, a young architect who had hoped to establish his reputation through this project. Not inexperienced, Jeckyll in 1870 had designed several rooms at the Holland Park house of Alexander Ionides. His simple and refined arrangement of panels and oak framing in the billiard room foreshadowed the horizontal and vertical elements that define the Peacock Room. Moreover, Jeckyll was already gaining a reputation for his cast-iron designs.

Jeckyll's plan for Leyland's dining room was guided largely by three fundamental requirements. He had to provide a setting for Whistler's painting *The Princess from the Land of Porcelain*, cover the walls with leather hangings, and provide Leyland with shelves to display the large number of oriental blue-and-white porcelains that he had collected under the guidance of Murray Marks. Accordingly, Jeckyll installed a thin shell-like construction of wood and canvas to hold the leather and walnut shelving for the ceramics. This important, although perhaps unintentional, structural design made it possible to dismantle and re-erect this famous room four times—although not without some damage to the decorations—in 1904, 1905, 1920, and most recently in 1947.

2. *Self-Portrait of James McNeill Whistler* (06.57), circa 1858;
oil on canvas; 46.3 x 38.1 cm.

Legend suggests that the costly, brown Spanish leather was brought to England by Catherine of Aragon (1485–1536), who in turn gave it to a court official. He supposedly installed the wall covering in his home in Norwich, where it may have been acquired by Leyland. The leather, which does indeed bear Catherine's open pomegranate motif, was covered with small red flowers (see fig. 3).⁷ Jeckyll completed the room's decor by designing a specially constructed wood ceiling with pendant lights, harmonizing with those elsewhere

3. Detail of leather wall covering. Right edge shows original appearance of the leather before Whistler painted it. 04, 61

in the house. These lights were built with gas fixtures, to which electric bulbs were later added.⁸ Jeckyll, however, soon lost control over the design for the dining room. When *The Princess from the Land of Porcelain* was installed over the mantel, Whistler claimed that the red flowers on the leather and the red border on Leyland's carpet clashed with the red in his painting. After he complained to Leyland, Whistler received permission to lighten the flowers with touches of yellow and gold and to trim the border off the rug. Dissatisfied

with the results, Whistler decided that the yellow paint and gilding “swore” at the yellow tone of the leather.⁹ Without consulting Jeckyll, Leyland subsequently agreed to let Whistler attempt further changes.

In the course of transforming the appearance of the Peacock Room, Whistler never made any fundamental structural changes, although he did consider removing the pendant lights.¹⁰ At first he made only minor alterations, hesitating to paint over the Spanish leather. In an undated letter to Leyland, who had left town on an extended business trip, he wrote:

Dear Leyland, Your walls are finished— They are to receive their last coat of varnish tomorrow—(indeed the men promised to do part this afternoon)—and on Friday you can put up the pots—

The blue which I tried as an experiment was quite injurious on the tone of this leather—and so I have carefully erased all trace of it—retouching the small yellow flowers wherever required—leaving the whole work perfect and complete—The wave pattern above and below—on the gold ground—will alone be painted in blue—and this I shall come and do on Friday—without at all interfering with the pots on the leather.¹¹

While Whistler may have considered his work finished when he wrote this letter, he soon abandoned minor adjustments in favor of radical changes. Developing a motif based on the eye- and breast-feathers of the peacock, he created a lavish design in gold on blue. On the window shutters, he reversed the oil colors and painted a blue peacock on a gold ground. The peacock device was not entirely new to Whistler, for he is said to have proposed the motif as a theme for decoration in Aubrey House, the home of William C. Alexander, another of his patrons.¹² Furthermore, Whistler’s friend the architect E. W. Godwin had used the peacock as a design for wallpaper in 1873, and fellow artist Dante Gabriel Rossetti kept the birds as pets in his garden. Finally, G. A. Audsley and J. L. Bowes had recently published a drawing in *Keramic Art of Japan* (London, 1875) that Whistler almost certainly used as the basis for his two fighting peacocks on the wall opposite *The Princess from the Land of Porcelain* (see figs. 4 and 5).¹³

Even though the peacock motif was already familiar to the public, Whistler’s elaborate application of the theme aroused much excitement. Visitors who flocked to see him paint the dazzling birds in gold and turquoise were impressed; one even pronounced them “extremely new and original.”¹⁴ Whistler described the transformation of Jeckyll’s sedate, leather-covered chamber as an entirely spontaneous endeavor:

Well, you know, I just painted as I went on, without design or sketch—it grew as I painted. And towards the end I reached such a point of perfection—putting in every touch with such freedom—that when I came round to the corner where I had started, why, I had to paint part of it over again, or the difference would have been too marked. And the harmony in blue and gold developing, you know, I forgot everything in my joy in it!¹⁵

4 and 5. *Top*, northeast corner; *bottom*, southwest corner, Peacock Room.

The artist became so immersed in the project that he gave up a long-planned journey to Venice and labored over the Peacock Room through the winter. Working at a furious pace, he painted the ceiling with a brush tied to a fishing rod, as he lay in a hammock. Whistler and his assistants, one of whom was Walter Greaves, rose every morning before six o'clock, arrived at Prince's Gate an hour later, and painted until nightfall, pausing only for lunch.

Despite such concentrated effort, Whistler received visitors while he worked on the Peacock Room. They included such members of the Royal Family as the Prince of Teck, Princess Louise, and the Marquis of Westminster. Whistler even had his printer, Thomas Way, prepare a descriptive leaflet to hand out to his guests. The artist became somewhat overelated by the praise he received in the press. Asked if he had consulted Leyland before departing so radically from the original decorative scheme, Whistler replied airily:

Why should I? I am doing the most beautiful thing that ever has been done, you know—the most beautiful room!¹⁶

Whistler also designed a sideboard for one end of the Peacock Room, over which he planned to hang his painting *Three Figures: Pink and Grey* (1868–78, the surviving example of several versions, now in the Tate Gallery, London), the only one of the so-called Six Projects he ever completed. Oil sketches begun in the late 1860s when Whistler was working very closely with the English painter Albert Moore, the Six Projects were intended for enlargement and use as mural decorations. Some scholars believe that Whistler may have meant to use all Six Projects in the Peacock Room, although their installation would have displaced the shelving.¹⁷ The series, however, was never completed. Jeckyll's shelves remained in the Peacock Room, and the Six Projects became part of the Freer Gallery's collection (02.138 and 03.175–03.179). Whistler substituted blue mosaics for the original tiles around the fireplace and gilded, sunflower-shaped andirons for those previously used by Leyland.¹⁸ Finally, he put in a specially woven turquoise carpet, removing the large ornate rug that Leyland had treasured.¹⁹

Whistler's characteristic butterfly cipher, derived from his initials and used predominantly after 1869 in lieu of his signature, appears in four locations: at the top of the right shutter of the central window, in the southwest corner of the ceiling, on the upper left panel of the top of the sideboard, and again at the left end of the long panel over the sideboard.

It is said that when Thomas Jeckyll saw what had become of the room that he had hoped would establish his reputation, he "hurried home, gilded his floor, and forgot his grief in a mad house."²⁰ The dramatic account has often been repeated, making it increasingly difficult to separate fact from fiction. What is not widely recognized is that Whistler and Jeckyll had been friends for many years before the decoration of the Peacock Room. After Jeckyll's disappointment and ensuing mental illness, Whistler wrote Jeckyll's brother:

Your brother Tom was always one of my intimate comrades and we were greatly attached and in the sorrow that has come upon him no one has been more grieved than myself.²¹

Seemingly oblivious to the fact that he had destroyed Jeckyll's work, Whistler went on to explain that he and Jeckyll had mutual respect for each other's taste, and that he, Whistler, had redecorated the Peacock Room long after Jeckyll's scheme had been completed. Perhaps in partial atonement for what he had done, Whistler sent letters to the newspapers giving Jeckyll credit for the structural design of the room.²²

Leyland, who was away from London while Whistler was repainting the room, received only cursory communications that did not indicate the extent to which the dining room had been transformed. The quarrel that erupted upon Leyland's return in April 1877 is famous. Whistler requested 2,000 guineas for the redecoration, even though it went far beyond the work that Leyland had commissioned. Although there was no formal contract, the original understanding was that Whistler should receive 500 guineas. As work progressed, the amount was increased to 1,000 guineas. Because Whistler had failed to deliver other paintings previously owed to Leyland, including the industrialist's own portrait, the angry Leyland refused to pay the requested 2,000 guineas, giving Whistler only 1,000 pounds.²³ Whistler was insulted, not only by the lower fee, but also because he was paid in pounds. Artists were customarily paid in guineas; payment in pounds implied the demotion of his work from art to merchandise, an offense that he could not tolerate.²⁴ For Leyland, a further source of irritation was the fact that Whistler had essentially held court in Leyland's home during his absence. Harsh words were exchanged—Leyland called Whistler an "artistic Barnum," and Whistler labeled Leyland a "parvenu"—and a permanent break ensued.²⁵ Murray Marks later insisted that the quarrel with Whistler had undoubtedly hastened Leyland's premature death in 1892.²⁶

The mural on the south wall over the sideboard (*see* frontispiece) shows a "poor" peacock at left and a "rich" peacock greedily clutching his shillings at right, signifying the relationship of artist and patron. After their quarrel, Whistler painted frills on the "rich" bird to make it refer to Leyland, who was known for wearing ruffled shirts. Thus, he intended the panel as his final word on the shipping magnate-art collector. Forbidden by Leyland in July 1877 ever to enter the house, Whistler wrote in a letter to Mrs. Leyland:

I refer you to the Cartoon opposite you at dinner, known to all London, as *L'Art et l'Argent* or *The Story of the Room*.²⁷

Whistler painted several other caricatures of Leyland, one of which he entitled *The Gold Scab* (1879, The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, M. H. de Young). This painting represents an odious peacock playing the piano, a well-known pastime of Leyland's.

6. Dining room of Frederick R. Leyland, 1892. Photograph courtesy of the National Monuments Record, London.

Despite the acrimonious end to their relationship, Leyland eventually acknowledged the artistic merit of Whistler's work, and he carefully preserved and valued the Peacock Room for the rest of his life (*see* fig. 6). Moreover, both Leyland and Murray Marks soon realized that the Peacock Room was now less suited to the display of blue-and-white porcelain than when it had been decorated with simple brown leather. Considering the room sufficiently ornate, they removed much of the porcelain from the shelving that originally had been meant to hold it.²⁸

After the completion of the Peacock Room, Whistler's affairs deteriorated until his finances had reached a hopeless state by 1879. The artist later claimed that it was the Peacock Room that caused his bankruptcy.²⁹ His principal creditor at the bankruptcy trial was his former patron, Frederick R. Leyland.

When Leyland died in 1892, the Mansion at 49 Prince's Gate and its contents were offered for sale. *The Princess from the Land of Porcelain* was bought at Christie's of London on May 28, 1892, by Alexander Reid, a Glasgow dealer, at Whistler's urging. The house, however, was withdrawn from sale for want of a sufficient offer. It was finally sold in 1897 to Mrs. James (Rebecca) Watney, a member of the family of brewers. Mrs. Watney, who lived in the house until 1903, placed a mirror over the fireplace in the niche previously occupied by *The Princess from the Land of Porcelain* and was barely dissuaded by Whistler's friends from destroying the room.³⁰ She occasionally allowed visitors to see the famous Peacock Room, among them Charles Lang Freer, who visited in May 1902. Freer, who had begun collecting works by Whistler in 1887 when he acquired twenty-six etchings now known as the Second Venice Set (1886), did not care at first for the structural features of the room.³¹ However, he greatly admired the large panel over the sideboard and the three sets of folding window shutters, all of which bore peacock paintings (see figs. 7, 8, and 9).³²

Mrs. Watney's agents, Messrs., E. Brown and Philips of the Leicester Galleries, London, sold the room to Obach & Company Galleries of Bond Street in early 1904. The room was easily dismantled and re-erected in Obach's galleries because of the shell-like construction upon which leather and shelving had been mounted. Freer was offered the opportunity to buy the entire Peacock Room in January, long before the public was allowed to view it in June 1904. He telegraphed his reply to Gustave Mayer of Obach & Company, saying that he did not want the complete room, only the shutters and decorative panel:

The architectural design of the shelving and ceiling I have never liked, and I think if they were taken down and replaced in some other room, the result would never be particularly interesting. . . . The shelving was built to hold Mr. Leyland's collection of porcelain, and can never be useful for any other purpose. In fact the finest porcelain could not be properly shown upon these shelves. I felt this the first time I saw the room, and since then have been fully convinced by a careful study of the new room in the Metropolitan Museum of New York, especially built for the famous Garland Collection of porcelain, now owned by J. Pierpont Morgan.³³

Nonetheless, as Freer already owned *The Princess from the Land of Porcelain* (purchased in 1903), one wonders at his reluctance to acquire the room designed to display it.

Despite his initial response, however, the Detroit collector continued to inquire about the construction features of the Peacock Room; although he had previously seen the room, he could not recall its exact appearance:

I had no thought in this direction [of re-erecting the Peacock Room] at the time I visited the Leyland house, I carry in mind only the artistic impression.

The decorations seem to me to be very beautiful, but in trying to determine the physical condition of affairs, I am all at sea.³⁴

The letter reveals Freer's growing interest in the intriguing possibility of keeping the room intact, and he made plans to return to London to see it again. Arriving at Obach's on May 15, 1904, Freer bought the room the next day and arranged for it to be dismantled, packed, and shipped to Detroit.

Always reticent about publicizing his acquisitions, Freer took delight in frustrating the press's discovery of his purchase. When people learned that an American had bought the Peacock Room, the identity of the buyer was the subject of much speculation in the United States and England. Freer was particularly amused by the conjecture that the purchaser was J. Pierpont Morgan. By June 1904 the *Detroit Journal* learned that a collector in its own city was the new owner of the Peacock Room.³⁵

Having concluded the transaction, Freer became even more enthusiastic. He believed that the Peacock Room was a fine example of mural decoration that would profoundly influence American art.³⁶ Like other collectors of his day, Freer was fond of seeking common elements among the diverse artistic expressions of different cultures. He believed that James McNeill Whistler, more than any other contemporary artist, united the art of the West with that of the Orient, a union demonstrated by the Peacock Room. Freer wrote to the collector Richard Canfield:

I have been making some quiet comparisons of the large decorations of the room with the most successful things of a similar nature of fifteenth and sixteenth century work in the Orient. It will please you to know that Whistler's things, in bigness of feeling, strength of line, use of space and general aesthetic accomplishment, hold their own with the very best.³⁷

Freer always intended the Peacock Room to be viewed in conjunction with his collection of Near and Far Eastern art.

When the Peacock Room arrived in Detroit in the autumn of 1904, Freer began renovating his stables to create both a paintings gallery and a space in which to install the disassembled room. Photographs indicate that he placed Chinese and Japanese ceramics on the elaborate shelving of the Peacock Room and a plain, bordered carpet on the floor. The collector had experimented with a Chinese rug but found that the pattern of the rug detracted from the objects on the shelves.³⁸

Freer began in 1916 to plan a gallery to house his collection in Washington. Included in the plan was a location especially constructed to house the Peacock Room. Upon Freer's death in 1919, the famous room was dismantled and installed in the present Freer Gallery of Art. Here Whistler's sumptuous turquoise-and-gold decorations can be seen in the context Freer had envisioned, among the exquisite porcelains, paintings, and sculptures that represent the finest examples of oriental art.

7, 8, and 9. Shutters, east wall, Peacock Room.

Left

Central

Right

10. Star frame from the ceiling of the Peacock Room, seen during restoration in the Freer Gallery of Art, 1926.

11. Plywood structure of the Peacock Room, seen during restoration in the Freer Gallery of Art, circa 1948.

Movement within the flimsy structure of the room caused by atmospheric changes resulted in great, though not irreparable, damage to the walls and ceiling. Excessive cracking of the wood surfaces made it necessary to remove most of the ceiling for repairs in 1926 (*see* fig. 10); the leather covering on the large south panel also received attention. It was soon realized, however, that these measures were temporary, and the room would require extensive conservation.

Plans made in 1942 for repairing the room were interrupted by the war, and only minor repairs to the south panel could be made. In 1947-48, however, the shell forming the upper wall was completely dismantled. An entirely new shell (*see* fig. 11) was constructed using plywood panels coated with plastic on both sides and securely cradled in a lattice backing to prevent warping. The leather was cleaned and treated, then mounted by floating it with a wax adhesive on the panels. The canvas below the leather was mounted by the same process. The panels, although attached securely to the gallery walls, may be removed without damage if necessary. In 1949 the ceiling was removed and treated. The difficult task of transferring the leather and canvas from the old shell to the new, as well as the entire job of restoration, was placed in the hands of John A. Finlayson, a restorer at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and his brother, Richard M. Finlayson. Their work made the Peacock Room less vulnerable to wear and minor atmospheric changes, and since 1949 only

minor conservation has been required. The introduction of an air-conditioning system in 1957 made it possible to maintain a relatively constant temperature with fifty percent relative humidity.

Entitling his work *Harmony in Blue and Gold: The Peacock Room*, Whistler followed his usual practice in naming his paintings by attaching both an abstract title alluding to color and a descriptive title. In similar fashion he orchestrated the color schemes used in his various houses and the galleries in which his exhibitions were held. He designed a white-and-yellow gallery, for example, to set off his Venetian etchings and a gold-and-brown gallery to harmonize with his pastels. His dining room at 2 Lindsey Row was painted in contrasting shades of blue, with purple Japanese fans attached to the walls and ceiling. Appropriately, the studio in which he painted his mother's portrait and that of Carlyle was gray and black. He decorated an earlier residence at 7 Lindsey Row with flesh tones, yellow, and white, and his house at 28 Tite Street with various hues of yellow.³⁹ Today, the Peacock Room is the only surviving example of Whistler's efforts in interior decoration. Testifying to the painter's deep concern for providing the proper environment for his works of art, the Peacock Room indeed functions as a frame for *The Princess from the Land of Porcelain*.

RELATED DRAWINGS

A number of Whistler's drawings for the Peacock Room survive in public collections in the United States and abroad (*see* figs. 12 and 13). The Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston, has studies for the feather motifs, a sketch for a wall section flanking the fireplace, a sheet of studies for the three shutters, a window section with the shutters open, and a sketch of the large wall panel of the two peacocks over the sideboard.⁴⁰ In the collection of the University of Glasgow are four sketches including drawings of ceiling details, a wall panel, and three shutters, and a full-scale cartoon of the south wall itself.⁴¹ Drawings for the shutters and south wall are also found in the S. P. Avery Collection of Prints of the New York Public Library. The British museum has some related sketches that are very cursory.

Since Whistler himself denied using drawings for planning purposes, and because the sketches closely resemble the finished work, they have generally been considered later in date than the painted decorations of the room. Perhaps they were made to accompany a verbal description of the room, a common practice for Whistler. However, the drawings for the central shutter in the Avery and Gardner collections may be exceptions. Both show the butterfly cipher in a semicircular field, radiating light. The peacock at right in the Gardner drawing has wings more outspread than in the final version. Such variations suggest that the artist may have worked out his ideas on paper prior to their execution.

12. and 13. Studies for the Peacock Room; pen and ink on paper. *Above*: 11.4 x 17.8 cm.; photograph courtesy of the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston. *Facing*: 31.7 x 19.8 cm.; photograph courtesy of the Hunterian Art Gallery, University of Glasgow; Birnie Philip Bequest.

14. *Rose and Silver: The Princess from the Land of Porcelain* (03.91), 1863–64; oil on canvas; 199.9 x 116.1 cm.

Rose and Silver: The Princess from the Land of Porcelain

PAINTED FROM 1863 TO 1864 BY

JAMES MCNEILL WHISTLER (1834–1903)

The model for *Rose and Silver: The Princess from the Land of Porcelain* was Christine Spartali, daughter of the Greek consul-general in London and a distant relative of the Ionides family, Whistler's close friends and patrons.⁴² Both Christine and her older sister, Marie (Mrs. W. J. Stillman), who posed for the Pre-Raphaelite painter Dante Gabriel Rossetti, were noted for their exotic beauty.

The Princess from the Land of Porcelain is one of a number of works painted in the 1860s in which Whistler posed languid young European women among oriental objects. Additional works from this period include *Purple and Rose: The Lange Lizjen of the Six Marks* (1864, Philadelphia Museum of Art), *Caprice in Purple and Gold No. 2: The Golden Screen* and *Variations in Flesh Color and Green: The Balcony* (1864 and 1868, Freer Gallery of Art, 04.75 and 92.23, respectively).

The Princess from the Land of Porcelain portrays a young woman in a graceful s-shaped pose reminiscent of figures in Japanese woodblock prints. She is dressed in a kimono of rose and dark silver gray with a red sash and holds in her right hand a fan decorated with flowers on an off-white background. Behind her stands a six-panel folding screen with a flower-and-bird motif, and on the floor there is a blue-and-off-white rug with a Chinese-inspired pattern. A crimson drapery and a blue-and-white oriental vase further embellish the background. Whistler made a preparatory oil sketch for the painting (now in the collection of the Worcester Art Museum), in which the model appears more Japanese than does the figure in the completed canvas.⁴³

The Princess from the Land of Porcelain is inscribed "Whistler, 1864," a characteristic signature for his works in the early 1860s. In 1869 however, he developed his famous butterfly signature by superimposing his initials, J. M. W., and placing them in an oblong cartouche. Whistler's butterfly

15. The Peacock Room with *The Princess from the Land of Porcelain* as displayed in the residence of Charles Lang Freer, Detroit, 1905–19.

evolved over the years from a sinuous and complex form to a progressively simplified one, until it became a mere silhouette.⁴⁴ The artist's experience with *The Princess from the Land of Porcelain* may have been the decisive factor in his development of the butterfly signature.⁴⁵ Because Mr. Spartali disapproved of Whistler's portrait of his daughter Christine he did not wish to buy it, and Rossetti, Whistler's good friend, agreed to sell the painting for him from his own studio. A wealthy collector who saw the canvas in Rossetti's studio proposed to buy it if the artist would reduce the size of his large signature, but Whistler was predictably indignant at the suggestion and refused. It is possible that Whistler's later recollection of the wealthy collector's objection to his bold signature influenced his adoption of the butterfly cipher.

Rossetti eventually sold the work to an unknown collector, upon whose death it was purchased by Frederick R. Leyland, one of Whistler's major patrons. Leyland ultimately placed *The Princess from the Land of Porcelain* over the mantel of his dining room in the Mansion, at 49 Prince's Gate, which led Whistler to redecorate the Peacock Room. When Christie's of London auctioned Leyland's estate after his death in 1892, *The Princess from*

the Land of Porcelain was purchased by Alexander Reid, a Glasgow dealer and friend of Whistler. Reid sold the painting to William Burrell of Glasgow, from whom Charles Lang Freer bought it in August 1903. Whistler's letters to Reid indicate that the artist was eager for the painting to be exhibited after Leyland's death; furthermore, still smarting from the poor treatment accorded him by British critics, he wanted the painting sold abroad, especially to an American.⁴⁶

After Freer bought the Peacock Room in 1904 and installed it in his Detroit home, the painting was restored to its place over the mantel (see fig. 15). It remained an integral part of the famous room when the Freer collection was subsequently transferred to Washington after Freer's death in 1919 and is displayed in its original surroundings, as Whistler had intended.

The frame on the painting is one of Whistler's earliest, and he designed it especially for this work. It is covered with gold leaf with carved designs derived from oriental motifs.

NOTES

1. Quoted in Elizabeth and Joseph Pennell, *The Whistler Journal* (London and Philadelphia, 1921), p. 73.
2. Denys Sutton, *James McNeill Whistler* (London, 1966), p. 29; and Stephan Tschudi Madsen, *The Origins of Art Nouveau* (New York, 1956), p. 188. Clay Lancaster notes that among the architects who devised decorations and furnishings along Far Eastern lines were E. W. Godwin, William Eden Nesfield (a partner of Norman Shaw), and "Henry" Jeckyll ("To Art Nouveau," *Art Bulletin* 34 [December 1952]: 300). Jeckyll's given name was Thomas, not Henry, an error repeated in much of the literature on the Peacock Room.
3. Val Princep and Lionel Robinson, "The Private Art Collection of London, the late Mr. Frederick Leyland's in Prince's Gate," *Art Journal* (May 1892): 129-38.
4. Quoted in G. C. Williamson, *Murray Marks and His Friends* (London and New York, 1919), p. 92.
5. Peter Ferriday, "Peacock Room," *Architectural Review* 125 (June 1959): 408. Ferriday suggests that Leyland may have advanced money to Whistler as early as 1864.
6. Theodore Child, "A Pre-Raphaelite Mansion," *Harper's Magazine* 82 (December 1890): 82.
7. Elizabeth and Joseph Pennell, *The Life of James McNeill Whistler*, vol. 1 (London and Philadelphia, 1908), p. 204. See also, Obach & Company Galleries, *The Peacock Room* (London, 1904); James Laver, *Whistler* (London, 1951), p. 131; and Williamson, *Murray Marks and*

- His Friends*, pp. 90–91. Williamson's thorough discussion affirms that the leather bears the open pomegranate motif.
8. Williamson, *Murray Marks and His Friends*, p. 89. An early photograph of the room shows electric lights adjacent to the gas fixtures, as they appeared in Leyland's home; see Pennell, *Life of Whistler*, vol. 1, opposite p. 208. Today the electric bulbs are inside the pendant fixtures.
 9. Pennell, *Life of Whistler*, vol. 1, p. 204.
 10. *Ibid.*, p. 206.
 11. Whistler to Leyland, n.d., Pennell Collection, Box 6B, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.; cited by Ferriday, "Peacock Room," p. 412. Pennell, *Life of Whistler*, vol. 1, p. 205, quotes the entry for September 20, 1876, in the diary of Alan Cole to suggest a date by which Whistler had begun to use the peacock-feather device.
 12. Arts Council of Great Britain, *James McNeill Whistler* (London and New York, 1960), p. 89, cat. nos. 114 and 115. Whistler did not carry out his decorative scheme; see Pennell, *Life of Whistler*, vol. 1, p. 202.
 13. Robin Spencer, *The Aesthetic Movement* (London, 1972), pp. 70–71.
 14. Pennell, *Life of Whistler*, vol. 1, p. 205.
 15. *Ibid.*, p. 204.
 16. *Ibid.*, p. 206.
 17. Conversation with Andrew McLaren Young in the autumn of 1974. The author would like to thank Margaret MacDonald, author of the catalogue raisonné of Whistler oil paintings, for sharing the draft of her entry on the Peacock Room and for her generous advice over the years. Nigel Thorp, Special Collections, University of Glasgow, was also most helpful in rendering assistance. See also Pennell, *Life of Whistler*, vol. 1, p. 204. Charles Lang Freer noted that the Venus sketches (i.e., the Six Projects) should be shown and studied with the Peacock Room; see Freer to Richard Canfield, September 7, 1904, Freer Letter Books, vol. 14, p. 464, Freer Gallery of Art.
 18. Gardner Teall, "Mr. Whistler and the Art Crafts," *House Beautiful* 13 (February 1903): 190. See also Child, "Pre-Raphaelite Mansion," p. 84.
 19. Teall, "Mr. Whistler and the Art Crafts."
 20. Pennell, *Life of Whistler*, vol. 1, p. 207.
 21. Whistler to Jeckyll n.d., J28 (BP II 23/62), Glasgow University Library, cited by Ferriday, "Peacock Room," p. 413.
 22. Ferriday "Peacock Room," p. 413.
 23. Leyland to Whistler, October 21, 1876, L106 (BP II 23/13); [October 24–30, 1876] L109 (BP II 23/16); and October 30, 1876, L110 (BP II 23/17), Glasgow; also Pennell, *Life of Whistler* (1911 edition), p. 150.
 24. Whistler to Leyland, October 31, 1876, L111 (BP II 23/18), Glasgow; also Pennell, *Life of Whistler*.

25. Leyland to Whistler, July 6, 1877, L117 (BP II 23/23), and July 24, 1877, L128 (BP II 23/31), Glasgow; also Ferriday "Peacock Room," p. 413.
26. Williamson, *Murray Marks and His Friends*, p. 96.
27. Whistler to Mrs. Leyland [July 1877], L133 (BP II 23/34), Glasgow. Over the years, however, the episode became exaggerated. See, for example, Mortimer Menpes, *Whistler as I Knew Him* (London, 1904), pp. 129–32. This more dramatic version of the story suggests that the "poor" and "rich" peacocks had been painted immediately, as revenge against Leyland. The spontaneity of their execution is unlikely, as the two birds were based on a drawing in *Keramic Art of Japan* (London, 1875), and Whistler had made a preparatory cartoon for them (now in the University of Glasgow).
28. Williamson, *Murray Marks and His Friends*, pp. 94–95.
29. Pennell, *The Whistler Journal*, p. 100.
30. Graham Robertson to Mr. Gregg, August 28, 1932, Freer Gallery; also Ferriday, "Peacock Room," p. 414.
31. Freer to Rosalind Birnie Philip, January 28, 1904, Freer Gallery.
32. Freer to Gustave Mayer of Obach & Company Galleries, January 27, 1904, Freer Letter Books, vol. 13, p. 23; and March 5, 1904, Freer Letter Books, vol. 13, p. 211, Freer Gallery.
33. Freer to Mayer, January 27, 1904, Freer Gallery.
34. Freer to Mayer, March 5, 1904, Freer Gallery.
35. John M. Kennedy to Freer, June 14, 1904, Freer Letter Books, vol. 14, p. 155, Freer Gallery. The purchase remained a mystery for a time, and the *New York World*, August 17, 1904, reported Morgan's acquisition of the room (Scrapbook, Freer Gallery).
36. Freer to William K. Bixby, July 11, 1904, Freer Letter Books, vol. 14, p. 264, Freer Gallery.
37. Freer to Canfield, September 7, 1904, Freer Letter Books, vol. 14, p. 463, Freer Gallery.
38. Freer to D. J. R. Ushikubo, September 14, 1908, Freer Letter Books, vol. 25, p. 79, Freer Gallery.
39. Pennell, *Life of Whistler*, vol. 1, pp. 137–38, 292, and 300.
40. Rollin van R. Hadley, ed., *Drawings, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum* (Boston, 1968), pp. 37–41.
41. Arts Council of Great Britain, *Whistler*, pp. 90–91.
42. Denys Sutton, *Whistler*, p. 187.
43. Frederick A. Sweet, *James McNeill Whistler* (Chicago, 1968), illustrated on p. 24.
44. Pennell, *Life of Whistler*, vol. 1, p. 125.
45. *Ibid.*, pp. 124–25.
46. Whistler to Reid, June 15, 1892, Letter 198; and Beatrix Whistler (for the artist) to Reid, November 9, 1892, Letter 195, Freer Gallery.

EXHIBITIONS

HARMONY IN BLUE AND GOLD: THE PEACOCK ROOM

- 1904 London, Obach & Company Galleries
- 1905-19 Detroit, exhibited privately, Charles Lang Freer's residence,
33 Ferry Avenue (now 71 East Ferry Avenue)
- Since 1923 Washington, D.C., Freer Gallery of Art

ROSE AND SILVER: THE PRINCESS FROM THE LAND OF PORCELAIN

- 1865 Paris, the Salon, Eighty-third Exhibition (no. 2220)
- 1872 London, South Kensington Museum, International Exhibition
(no. 261)
- 1875 Brighton, Royal Pavilion Gallery, Second Annual Exhibition of
Modern Pictures (no. 156)
- 1892 London, The Society of Portrait Painters' [Second] Exhibition
(no. 113)
- 1893 Chicago, World's Columbian Exposition (no. 636 in listing by
artist; no. 1100 in listing by location)
Philadelphia, The Pennsylvania Academy of The Fine Arts,
Sixty-third Annual Exhibition (no. 32)
- 1896 Glasgow, Institute of Fine Arts, Thirty-fifth Exhibition (no. 129)
- 1898 London, International Society of Sculptors, Painters, and
Gravers, Exhibition of International Art (no. 180)
- 1899 Venice, Third International Exposition (no. 58)
- 1901 Glasgow, Glasgow Art Galleries, International Exposition (no.
505)
- 1903 Edinburgh, Royal Scottish Academy, Seventy-seventh Exhibition
(no. 292)
- 1903-19 Detroit, exhibited privately, Charles Lang Freer's residence,
33 Ferry Avenue (now 71 East Ferry Avenue)
- 1904 Boston, Copley Society, Oil Paintings, Watercolors, Pastels, and
Drawings (no. 32)
- 1905 Paris, Exposition des Oeuvres de James McNeill Whistler (no. 9)
- Since 1923 Washington, D.C., Freer Gallery of Art

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